Why sensemaking is not enough

Changemaking as concept and intervention method

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Abstract

In this conceptual paper, we investigate how a process and sensemaking oriented approach can be used to bring planned, management initiated change about. A particular problem when working with sensemaking in practice is to move beyond the create meaning to action and results. Therefore, we introduce the concept of Changemaking, which emphasizes the interplay between sensemaking and action. We conceptualize changemaking as two different types of processes, supported by two method: 'Everyday scenarios' and 'rapid launch of experiments with logbook follow up'. The purpose of the two changemaking processes and methods is to facilitate the shared discovery, adjustment and stabilization of the new work practices that the employees perceive as appropriate for implementing the planned change at the operational level.

Keywords: Change processes, sensemaking, changemaking, intervention methods

Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the possibilities for further application oriented development of the theory of organizational change, which is called the process perspective (Hernes 2014). This perspective is characterized by a focus on participant involvement and the qualification and specification of potential changes based on the participants' knowledge, visions and values. As such, the process perspective differs from the technical-rational theory of organizational change, which represents a plan-driven, top-down approach to change (Lewin 1947; Weick and Quinn 1991). We are especially interested in how the process perspective can be used in connection with politically or management initiated, planned change.

Sensemaking is a core concept in the process oriented tradition (Weick 1995). With sensemaking the focus is on the participants' interpretations and understandings and methodically this means that the emphasis is on the creation of shared meaning in

relation to organizational change processes. The weakness of this theoretical and methodical approach is that there is much less focus on how sensemaking leads to results, in the form of new and appropriate work practices.

To address this weakness we introduce the concept of changemaking, which emphasizes the interplay between sensemaking and action. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to argue for the need for theory and methods that are explicitly changemaking oriented. Moreover, the purpose is to propose methods that can facilitate the interplay between sensemaking and action in order to implement a given change as new practice, which is experienced as appropriate by the employees.

Thus, throughout the paper we are interested in how appropriate work practices can be discovered, among other things, through the use of methods that facilitate a dual focus on the top-down planned goals as well as the employees' professional values and knowledge of what is feasible at the operational level. As such, the paper is based on the assumption that change processes benefit from being designed and facilitated to make potentially opposing goals and values meet in such a way that the employees can continue to experience their work as empowering and meaningful.

Sensemaking and changemaking

Weick is an important and well-known researcher within the process perspective. Weick's theory focuses on organizational life and the organizational members' sensemaking. Sensemaking (Weick 1995) describes how the individual organizational member creates meaning. This occurs as some actions and events stand out more clearly than others in the ongoing stream of activities. This is in line with cognitive learning and institutional theories that state that interpretation of actions and events is based on individual and/or collective cognitive schemata (Cambell 1998; Piaget 1977).

The individual sensemaking occurs continuously and, so to speak, by itself. However, it is also possibly to work actively with sensemaking – which is particularly relevant in connection with planned, management-initiated change. In practice, this is often done through workshops that take place in the beginning of a change process and

which aim to create shared meaning about the change from a general perspective - using general arguments for why the change is needed and which consequences it will have for the organization (or organizational unit) as a whole.

However, in this section we argue that this way of working with sensemaking is not enough for the involved organizational actors to be able to bring the planned change about. There is a need for more focus on action, and on the interplay between sensemaking and action. We therefore emphasize the somewhat overlooked, but important action dimension of the sensemaking concept. We use this as our theoretical point of departure for proposing that it is important to work with changemaking – which we define as the interplay between sensemaking and action – during change processes. The purpose of changemaking is to facilitate processes where the employees can reflect actively, critically and specifically on the proposed changes; changes, which often are conceptualized by others (i.e. top management) detached from the actual practice within which they have to be feasible.

Why sensemaking is not enough

Sensemaking is by now well-known by many both organizational researchers and practitioners and there seems to be agreement that sensemaking is central in organizational practice and change processes. Yet, it remains difficult to know how to work with sensemaking in practice. This is, among other things, because Weick's theory about sensemaking in organizations (Weick 1995) is described at a relatively high level of abstraction. It can be considered a meta-theory, which describes the general processes and characteristics that occur during sensemaking. However, it does not provide methodical guidelines or explanations with regard to what it is beneficial to create shared meaning *about*. In other words, the theory does not say anything about what should or could be the content of the sensemaking process. This means that it can be difficult to know how to translate the theoretical ideas and concepts to something that can be used in practice.

If, despite of this, it is decided to work actively with sensemaking during change processes, it can be experienced as slow and difficult to involve (all) organizational members in sensemaking processes. Perhaps because sensemaking is particularly

associated with talk – about political and financial arguments, visions, values and ideas – and not with action and results. In line with this, it is a familiar experience for many employees to be involved in different types of strategy- and change processes, but without ever seeing any follow up or results from their contributions. Likewise, it is a well known experience for many employees to be asked to fill in questionnaires about work environment and employee satisfaction. The results here of are then discussed in employee groups or –teams, but often the process does not go any further. Shared meaning might have been created, but not change.

Weick highlights the importance of words, but he also stresses that the words have to serve as a springboard for action: "*Sensemaking involves turning circumstances into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words and that serves as a springboard into action"* (Weick m.fl. 2005, s. 409). A particular problem when working with sensemaking in practice, is, however, to move beyond the create meaning – that is, from the understanding of the situation that has been comprehended in words – to action and results. This problem arises in part because the action dimension of the sensemaking concept is overlook or not prioritized compared to working with sensemaking as a verbal practice. And in part because there is a lack of methods that explicitly aim to translate the created meaning to effective action.

The action dimension of sensemaking

However, Weick places much emphasize on action and on the interplay between sensemaking and action. Thus, it is highlighted that: *"Sensemaking is about action. If the first question of sensemaking is "what's going on here", the second, equally important question is "what do I do next"."* (Weick m.fl. 2005, s. 412).

As the quote points out, it is the actions that have been performed and the events that have occurred that can be assigned meaning. As such, action – both one's own and those of others – come before meaning. Thus, sensemaking is retrospective. This points to a need to start acting in accordance with the goals of a given change relatively fast, in order to be able to create meaning about how the change actually will affect the organization and one's own everyday work.

At the same time, organizations and organizational members create their own reality thought the actions and events that get their attention and which they assign meaning to. Thus, what one employee perceives as a relatively unimportant but positive change, might be perceived as important and negative by another. In relation to change, this points to the importance of working actively with the shaping of attention and with the words and meanings that are assigned to the new actions and practices required to bring the planned change about.

Changemaking: The interplay between sensemaking and action

Weick does not use the concept of changemaking. Instead, the concept is inspired by an empirical studie of how a strategic design agency works with ”sensemaking for changemaking” (Friis 2006). Sensemaking for changemaking stresses that one has to *both* interpret and create making about the situation in which one finds oneself *and* act upon and try to shape the situation. This is in line with Weick’s theory and the abovementioned quotes, which emphasize that sensemaking is about paying attention to what happens in one’s surroundings in order to turn these events into a situation that is comprehended explicitly in words – and to use this understanding as a scaffold for deciding what to do next.

Thus, the concept of changemaking highlights a very important point, namely that while it of course is very relevant to spend resources to ensure that shared meaning is created at the beginning of a change process, it is not enough. It is equally important to facilitate the ongoing sensemaking that occur in the everyday, while the organization members are engaged in implementing the planned change.

This in turn means that there is a need for working specifically with the interplay between sensemaking and action and for maintaining a focus on this interplay over time. Changemaking does not come by itself; it requires an effort.

Two types of changemaking processes

Based on the above theoretical presentation, we use the concept of changemaking to highlight the need for planning and faciliting sensemaking processes where the situation and new ways of working are comprehended explicitly in words *and* which

makes it possible to engage in ongoing sensemaking about changes that have already been initiated. We conceptualize this as two different changemaking processes.

The purpose of the first changemaking process (see Figure 1) is to create meaning about the new ways of working that constitute the core of the planned change and therefore to describe what the employees have to do differently in the future. In this way, action competences are created in the form of an explicated understanding of what the change means for those who have to incorporate it into their everyday work.

The purpose of the second changemaking process (see Figure 2) is to create meaning about which of the initiated changes that do or do not work in practice. Moreover, the purpose is to be able to make adjustments, and possibly also significant alterations, in order to ensure that both the planned goals, unanticipated consequences and new opportunities are taken into account while the process of discovering what constitutes new and appropriate practice is taking place.

Figure 1: Changemaking that starts with sensemaking

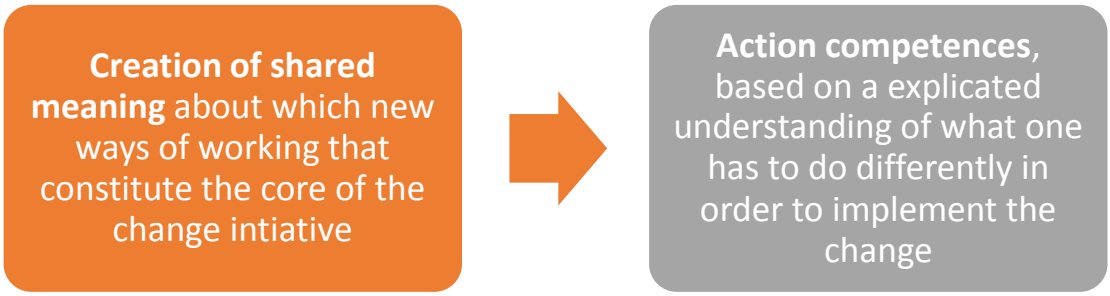
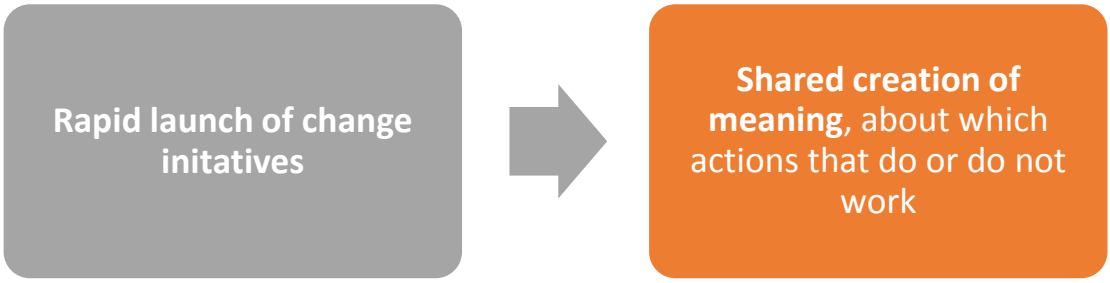


Figure 2: Changemaking that starts with action



In the first figure, the process starts with sensemaking. The focus is on the creation of meaning about the change initiative in terms of which new ways of working that are necessary to bring the change about. This focus on work practices helps the employees build action competences, i.e. competences that make them able to act in a way that is in line with the desired change. In the second figure, the process starts with action in the form of launched change initiatives. These initiatives require ongoing reflection and sensemaking about which of the new ways of working that both ensure goal achievement and are experienced (or not) as appropriate action by the employees.

Changemaking methods

This section describes how the two types of changemaking processes can be supported by two changemaking methods, which we refer to as ’everyday scenarios’ and ’rapid launch of change experiments and logbook follow up’. The two methods are intervention oriented because the aim is to intervene into an existing situation and practice in order to create new understandings and ways of working.

Everyday scenarios

In line with Weick’s focus on the micro processes that constitutes the organization at the operational level and as illustrated in Figure 1, we propose that it is important to develop the organizational members’ competences for acting in accordance with the planned change in their everyday work. We suggest that these action competences can be developed through the use of everyday scenarios.

An everyday scenario is a narrative about a future day as it could be after the change has become reality – with all the many things that happens from the work day starts and until it finishes. Narrative theory and studies of how stories support innovation- and change processes (Abbott 2008, Escalfoni m.fl. 2011, Müller 2013, Wright 2005) show that stories makes it possible to envision the future as a specific situation which the individual can imagine being and acting in. This is due to the fact that stories are anchored in time and space, are experienced from the main character’s perspective and language (in this case, from each of the participating employee’s perspective), and are driven forward as a story through the main character’s actions and interactions

(Nielsen 2014). As such, everyday scenarios can be used to explore and specify the planned change as future action.

The outlined everyday scenarios can support the development of action competences, because they help the organizational members develop a shared, explicated understanding of the new ways of working that constitute the core of the planned change. The everyday scenarios also provide insight into the employees' views on the more or less beneficial consequences for their everyday work practices, and therefore a chance to adjust for inappropriate consequences by rethinking the new work practices within the frame of the planned change - before the change is launched.

Rapid launch of change experiments, supported by logbook follow up

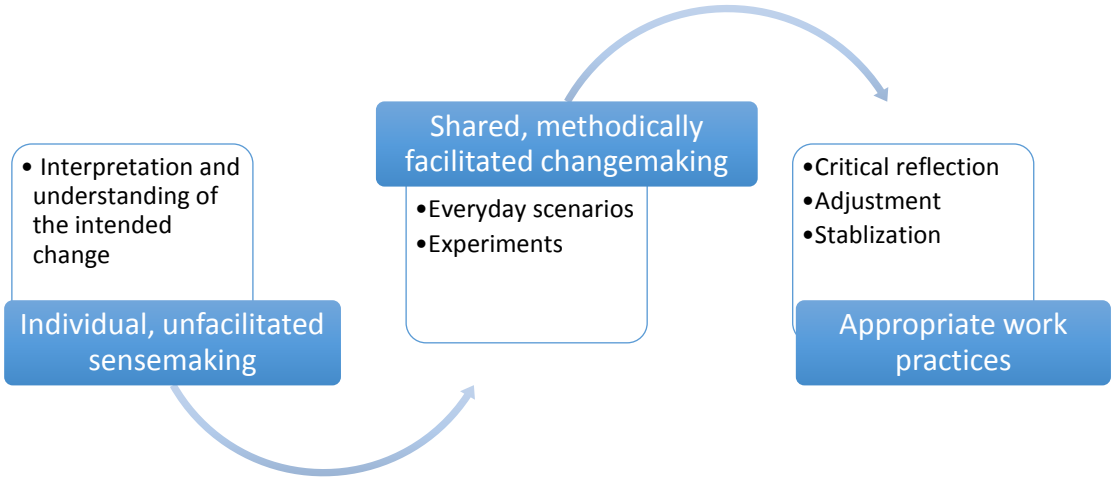
As mentioned above and as illustrated in Figure 2, it can be useful to start acting in accordance with the planned change as fast as possible in order to be able to create meaning about the change. We propose that this can be done by involving as many organizational members as feasible in the rapid launch of different experiments that explore how the planned change can be achieved through different ways of working. Based on these experiments it is possible to engage in ongoing reflection about which of the initiated actions that are, or are not, effective in terms of goal achievement and employee satisfaction and to adjust accordingly. Method wise, we suggest that the ongoing reflection and documentation of the change experiments - including reflections on the actions taken, their positive and negative outcomes, and suggestions for improvement - can be supported by the use of a logbook. The logbook can be a physical artefact (e.g., a white or black board), an electronical file, etc.; it can contain text, pictures and/or other types of data; and it can be centered on questions that invite reflect or in other ways stimulate the creation of meaning about the change initiative. Thus, the logbook can take the form that fits best within the given work environment and organizational culture. The important thing is that the logbook supports the involved employees' prolonged individual and shared attention to and sensemaking about the change experiment, including critical reflection on the current situation and what might constitute an appropriate next step.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that sensemaking is necessary but not sufficient with regard to change processes. In addition, we have highlighted the importance of action, both as a foundation for the creation of meaning and in order to make sure that planned change is achieved. Therefore, we introduced the concept of Changemaking, which emphasizes the interplay between sensemaking and action.

We define changemaking as two different types of processes. The first changemaking process starts with sensemaking and has as its purpose to create action competences among the employees who have to incorporate the change into their everyday activities. We suggest that this changemaking process is supported by a method, which we call 'everyday scenarios'. In contrast, the second changemaking process starts with action. Method wise, we suggest that this changemaking process is carried out by launching change initiatives as experiments that are continually reflected upon and adjusted, until appropriate work practices have been identified and implemented. To sum up, the step wise process is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The step wise implementation process



One of the reasons "why sensemaking is not enough" is that there is no inherent relationship *between* understanding the intended change *and* the ability and commitment to act towards its achievement. But by using intervention methods and

by explicitly dedicating time and attention to the shared discovery, adjustment and stabilization of the work practices that the employees perceive as appropriate to bring the planned change about, we find is realistic to bridge the gap between meaning and action.

This approach to change management is to be tested in an upcoming research project about a number of major politically initiated change reforms in the Danish, public schools. The aim is to develop the approach further into a change management model suitable for organizations where the employees' and other stakeholders' positive commitment is essential in order to implement the desired changes.

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